

ENGLAND'S NEGLECT OF FREDERICK  
DELIUS

Antcliffe, Herbert

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By Verbert Antalfi

cap. 1

in the "New York Herald Tribune"

(Taken from the Musical Review for the Blind, October, 1932.)

In this twentieth century of ours it is an almost universal custom to give new readings to old sayings, possibly because we have not the genius to invent new sayings to fit our thoughts and circumstances. Among such new interpretations is one, which arises from the pride that spoils humility, to the effect that because in many cases "a profit is not without honor save in his own country," we have necessarily in every case ill-treated the greatest men of our own land and generation. A very striking instance of this peculiar interpretation is the way in which Englishmen are talking today about the way they, or their elders, have treated Frederick Delius and his music.

The myth of England's neglect and ill-treatment of Delius dates quite a long time back, but it took most definite shape nearly ten years ago when his friend, and incidentally in his way almost as great a genius as Delius himself, Philip Heseltine, wrote a biography that is, and is likely to remain, for its size one of the most authoritative, complete and understanding lives of any modern musician.

Heseltine understood Delius and his music as few others, as say, Sir Thomas Beecham, Beatrice Warrian, Edwin Evans, Sydney Grew and just a few more of us who for many years have been trying to make the rest of the world see below the surface of that music, have done. Whether he understood the circumstances in which he lived and worked, whether he was not prejudiced, as so many others have been when their favorite composer has been neglected by the people, who, they think, should be the most enthusiastic admirers and supporters of such composer, and by such prejudice was drawn into erroneous statements, is another question. It is from that prejudice, on the part of Heseltine and others, that the myth of Delius's recognition, in other countries and his neglect at home has arisen.

Frederick Delius has not been neglected by his own countrymen more than, or even so much as, by the rest of the world, or (to put it forcibly) alternatively, if he has it has been his own fault. The proof of these statements is to be found, among other places, in Mr. Heseltine's book.

Let it be said at once that neither in England nor in any other country has Delius received the recognition to which his genius entitles him. His style is unique, and therefore difficult to understand; he has ignored all the recognized rules and all tradition, which also makes



his music difficult to understand, while such music is not obviously melodic, which makes it difficult for the Englishman who is not a trained musician to appreciate. Yet, of the first performances mentioned by Weseltine, nearly 80 per cent were given in England, and of these performances a number have been by British artists. If one considers the number of opportunities for musical performances of any kind in England and the corresponding numbers in other countries where Delius has spent most of his life, one can unhesitatingly say that the proportion of appreciation, that is, the proportion with regard to the population and the general musical conditions, has been much greater than in any other country, if not greater than in all other countries put together.

When Delius first gave a concert of his own works in London there were a number of critics who neither understood his music nor had ears of sufficient to hear that it contained a message they themselves were not yet ready to receive. There were too, a number who realized that there was something in his music that was far beyond the ordinary outpourings of the mediocre kind, and who did not hesitate to say so. "If Delius's music seemed obscure," admits Weseltine, "at a first hearing, it was not by any means unfavorably received in this country." Put this alongside the fact that more performances of the works of Delius have taken place in England than in all other countries, and there is the greater neglect by his own countrymen than by others of such works?

Incidentally, also, Weseltine missed one excellent opportunity of showing English appreciation of one of Delius's most beautiful works, the choral setting of "Sea Drift." He mentions the first performance in England of that work, at Sheffield Musical Festival under Sir Henry Wood in 1906, a performance that brought out the ethos of the subject and the extremely delicate handling of voices and instruments to a remarkable degree, but he forgets to mention the enthusiasm with which it was received by both press and public. And that performance was the cause not only of appreciative criticisms in the English daily press but of articles, on that work and on the music of Delius generally, in musical and other periodicals the world over.

Turning then to the alternative argument, namely, that if Delius has been neglected by his own countrymen it is his own fault, we find still more abundant evidence. The question of the race of his father has little or nothing to do with this. Many a German-born man and woman has made a thoroughly good and characteristic English subject and artist, while the children of such people are often more English than those of parents who themselves have been born and brought up in the country. What has much to do with it is the fact that in his youth and early manhood Delius himself practically ignored his own British nationality, and,





quite apart from the business engagements which sent him to other countries, preferred to spend his time anywhere rather than in the land of his birth. Saxony, Scandinavia, Florida, France, each claimed him in turn, and if there is one country more than another that can claim him as one of its citizens that country is France, where for most of his life he has been domiciled. His friends during the most active part of his life were Strindberg, Gogol, Florent Schmitt (Féneline makes Ravel at the age of thirteen one of those who knew and admired his work), a Swedish sculptress, a French poet, a Polish painter, a Czech dancer, XXXXX Bjørnsterne Bjørnsen, Knut Hamsen, Gunnar Heiberg, Jelka Woson (the lady who became his wife and lifelong friend and support), not one of them English of of a nature to encourage the development of whatever British characteristics he possessed. The only feature of his manner of living that could attract the English music lover was that it was foreign; for the average Englishman has a great admiration (though not necessarily a great affection) for all music except that of his own country.

It is a common remark in such cases as this to say that the composer stayed out of his own country because his own countrymen failed to appreciate him. With Delius, however, it may be said with certainty that no one in England knew he had any musical ability out of the ordinary for the simple reason that neither he nor his immediate acquaintances gave them any opportunity of knowing. He himself, living in Europe and America, never paid a professional visit to England until he was nearly forty years old. He was thirty-one when he wrote his first English songs and thirty-five before he wrote any other work that could for its literary subject and musical theme be called English--the tone-poem, "Over the Hills and Far Away." Altogether he has written a score or so of works that can by reason of the choice of words for the vocal numbers or the programs behind the instrumental numbers be called English and a few American. Whose fault it is that nearly all his works have been published in Germany I cannot say, but it is not the custom for publishers in England or any other country to ask for works by unknown composers, as Delius was until comparatively late in life. Publishers are business men, not (with rare exceptions) patrons of art. It would be interesting to know how many of his early works, say of those written before 1905, Delius submitted to English publishers, how many of them were declined merely on the ground that he was unknown, and how many he would today care to have published, supposing he has not destroyed the manuscripts. If it were worth while, for this purpose, to look up the records of forty-five years ago no doubt Messrs. Augener, his first publishers, could throw some light on this subject. They might tell us, for instance, why they did not ask the young composer to give them the first rights in all his music, or at least let them see all that he wrote. The assumption is that they had reason for not doing so.



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No, it is a great pity that the genius of Delius was not recognized by the English musical public at an earlier date and that his music has never had that wide appeal which would make him generally acclaimed; but when one examines carefully the circumstances under which he has worked, his own actions in these circumstances and the exotic nature of much of his music, one must say, while regretting the fact that such acclamation has not come, that it is not the fault of the English people or of their musical leaders. It is the misfortune of all concerned, and that alone!



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